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To cite this article: Rita Sanders (2017) Between “Western” racism and (Soviet) national binarism: Migrants’ and nonmigrants’ ways of ordering Russia’s exclave of Kaliningrad, *Transnational Social Review*, 7:3, 244-257, DOI: [10.1080/21931674.2017.1359996](https://doi.org/10.1080/21931674.2017.1359996)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/21931674.2017.1359996>



Published online: 11 Aug 2017.



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Between “Western” racism and (Soviet) national binarism: Migrants’ and nonmigrants’ ways of ordering Russia’s exclave of Kaliningrad

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ABSTRACT

In Kaliningrad (and elsewhere in Russia), migrants and nonmigrants are often connected to places far beyond the state’s borders. In this article, I argue that two divergent transnational phenomena are at stake when investigating racism in Kaliningrad: firstly, ongoing conflicts between Russia and the “West” and, secondly, the almost globally perceived threat of Islam. The first aspect accounts for strengthening Russian nationalism and even more the old Soviet empire, which implies including one’s own (Muslim) migrants from Central Asia and the Caucasus. The second aspect, however, encompasses a broader perception of “whiteness” by seeing Muslims generally as a threat of “white” civilization. Nonetheless, this article demonstrates that binary concepts of “black” and “white” are not as fixed and hardened as they might appear at first because those people investigated here generally conceptualize themselves and the city they live in as being tolerant, which is also explained by the Soviet legacy of seeing racism only outside of one’s own cosmos.

KEYWORDS

Russia; racism; “Islamophobia”; migration; Kaliningrad

Preface

“Vladimir is one of the respondents with whom the ethnographer shared a lot during long-term fieldwork. During one of our conversations, he started talking about one of his favorite topics: his anxiety for the Germans, the Russians, and other Europeans. He was afraid that the extinction of all “whites” was merely a question of time if our governments did not begin to act decisively against the immigration of “nonwhites.” However, the refusal of “black immigrants” was obviously not intended by the governments, so he directed his critique particularly against the German Chancellor Angela Merkel, having in mind her open-border policy she implemented during the summer of 2015. Roughly 15 years ago, Vladimir, together with his wife and their two – now teen-aged – sons, migrated from Bishkek, the capital of Kirgizstan, to Kaliningrad, the Russian exclave located within the European Union. He said that he grew up on a street where, apart from two Russian families, only (Soviet) Turks lived. During his childhood, they happily played together, but when they came of age, their lives developed very differently. He further remarked that his Turkish neighbors did not assimilate, and therefore they did not become Russian. Vladimir interpreted these observations through his insights from biology which gave testimony that, in particular cases, one species would all of a sudden incorporate another species without prior

gradual assimilation, and he was afraid that such a sudden incorporation was the destiny of Russians and other “real Europeans.” Vladimir insisted on the analogy even when I commented that it seemed to be paradoxical because so far, only Russians had absorbed other nationalities. Further evidence for his theory was taken from his experiences in Bishkek where quite unexpectedly, his job as a film projectionist was taken over by a Kirgiz and, amongst others, by the fact that black people call themselves French and are even respected as such by the “white” French population as he had recently learned on television. His last statement provoked one of his sons, who joined our conversation towards the end, to call him a “racist” whereupon Vladimir hastily replied that he was a tolerant person who respected all people equally, irrespective of whether they, for instance, wore a cross or a symbol of any other religious community. Obviously, this was true for his relationship with one of his closest friends and colleagues, a Kirgiz, whom he got to know well during his time in Bishkek and for whom he prepared scrambled eggs almost every morning because a man has to eat properly and because his friend’s wife is constantly on a diet.” (Field notes 30 March 2016)

Vladimir’s views and how he acts show how quite a few people in Kaliningrad, having themselves migrated, try to order the world and find one’s place within it by also applying racially informed categories. Remarkably, in compiling this order, they draw particularly on their past experiences of discrimination in Central Asia and on what they have heard about immigration policies and realities in “Western Europe”; however, the situation in Kaliningrad is depicted rather as a haven for the many nationalities living together peacefully. These ambivalences are depicted and explained against the background of migrants’ and nonmigrants’ growing world where Soviet national binarism meets “Western” racial discourses where Russians are simultaneously previous colonizers and stigmatized “others” by the rest of the previous colonizers.

This article starts by elaborating on Soviet and post-Soviet concepts of nationality and race and how those are lived and thought about by people in present-day Kaliningrad. Specifically, discourses and actions will be exemplified around the construction of a mosque close to Kaliningrad’s city center, which was impeded a couple of years ago. In a further step, I will explore how people connect their nationality concepts to experiences elsewhere and how “Western” experiences and knowledge are transformed locally in order to aid establishing the “right order” of things and people in Kaliningrad. The concluding paragraph points to the wider implications of my arguments for our understanding of racism and its transnational interconnectedness.

Nationality and race in post-Soviet Russia

Russia has recently received attention because of its strong racist movements and numerous racist attacks on “black” people (cf. Arnold & Romanova, 2013; Varga, 2008; Zakharov, 2015). Between 2004 and 2006 alone, 150 people were killed in racist incidents in Russia (Varga, 2008, p. 562), and Arnold (2009) estimates that Russia accommodates about half of the worldwide skinhead movements. The individuals attacked were mostly people from the past Russian colonies in Central Asia, who now work and live in Russia’s cities including Kaliningrad¹. Moreover, Russian far-right groups also organize conferences where they deliberate with representatives of other European right-wing groups to develop an ideology of racial hygiene and seek measurements against Muslim immigration (Arnold & Romanova, 2013).

Many authors have asked how racial thinking could evolve in a country that only fought against racism for many decades, and racial practices like racial census categorization did not exist (Zakharov, 2015, p. 4f). The most common interpretation relates to the loss of

identity after the fall of the Soviet Union and the subsequent search for a scapegoat in the form of “alien” forces to be blamed for this, which is one of the major sources for racist thinking and acting (cf. Varga, 2008).

In their analysis of a far-right conference which was held in Moscow under the title of “The Future of the White World” in 2006, Arnold and Romanova (2013) instead point to people’s cultural concepts and memories. They conclude that the Russian participants largely argued on the basis of “Russia’s messianic identity” (p. 95, see also Duncan, 2000). The idea of Russians as the “chosen people” is interpreted as a “constant feature of Russian history, as seen in the veneration of Moscow as a third Rome” (Arnold and Romanova, 2013). Furthermore, messianic thoughts have also appeared in the form of communism and generally as the underlying idea of saving Europe (p. 98). Through the concept of a “white race,” Russians and non-Russians construct the common grounds for their collaboration. This exact process of Euro-Russian rapprochement after the fall of the Soviet Union itself is seen by Zakharov (2015) as a vehicle for racist thoughts because “since the disintegration of the Soviet Union in fact, race imagery has been used as the reliable anchor keeping Russia firmly within the ‘family of civilized peoples’” (p. 2). Generally, Zakharov (2015, p. 4), takes a global perspective by viewing “racialization [...] [as] an adaptation of the social system whereby national differences are arranged according to the logic of the global order.”

Next to deep-rooted cultural concepts and the logic of a (racist) global order, the policies of Soviet and post-Soviet governments are seen as boosting racist thoughts, though they officially strive for denigrating them. Varga (2008), for instance, points out that by denouncing most of oppositional thinking as fascist, the Russian government plays down far-right actions and contributes to their normalization. The state’s official fight against racism is, moreover, impaired by the fact “that the government does not shy away from defining and fighting its enemies from relying on the help of ‘real’ extremists” (p. 577). In regard to Soviet policies, in particular their celebration of fixed national identities, which were – as suggested, for instance, by some of Soviet movies – better to be grasped “through blood” is seen as preparing the grounds for racial constructions, though it was at the same time forbidden to speak of “races” (cf. Lemon, 2002; cf. Weitz, 2002).

Moreover, though census data and passport entries did not use racial categories, nationalities were listed and noted in each citizen’s passport whereby unofficial hierarchies among them truly existed during Soviet times and thereafter (cf. Hirsch, 2005). In particular, the category of *inorodtsy* (allogenes or “the others”), which was coined by Catherine the Great generally for nomads who ought to be colonized towards the end of the eighteenth century, also stimulated Soviet policies of *korenizatsiya* (indigenization). Those policies were in principle well intended and aimed at improving the legal and social status of the previously colonized but they equally further underlined the concept’s significance (Dave, 2007, p. 73f; Martin, 2001, p. 12; cf. Slocum, 1998, p. 178). Still in present-day Kazakhstan, people order the country’s inhabitants on the grounds of the category of *inorodtsy* which “helps” them to build two opposing groups, which lay the fundament for a national binarism (Sanders, 2016).

Grosfoguel (2004, p. 328) advocates for the concept of “coloniality of power” because “it allows us to understand the interface between racist cultures and social power relations with a long colonial history in the capitalist world system.” Thus, he generally indicates that “racial categories are built in relation to colonial histories” (p. 326) and large cities as previous centers of today’s empire “reproduce in their spatial boundaries the racial/ethnic hierarchies

of the old colonial empires” (p. 328), as can be seen in Kaliningrad, though the city was certainly not one of the old Russian empire’s centers.

In this article, I follow Silverstein’s (2005, p. 364) conceptualization of race as

“a cultural category of difference that is contextually constructed as essential and natural – as residing within the very body of the individual – and is thus generally tied, in scientific theory and popular understanding, to a set of somatic, physiognomic, and even genetic character traits.”

Moreover, racialization as the process of essentializing, naturalizing and/or biologizing “indexes the historical transformation of fluid categories of difference into fixed species of otherness” (Silverstein, 2005, p. 364). Consequently, racial thinking does not necessarily need explicit racial terminology, and moreover and interestingly, ethnicity does not entail an ideology as negative counterpart like there is nationalism for the notion of the nation (cf. Jenkins, 1997, p. 86; May, 2001, pp. 33–35). On the other hand, certainly not every allusion to a person’s ethnic belonging should be classified as racist.

In the following, I intend to reveal people’s ambivalences towards classifying others, which include “crossings across racial frontiers” and equal acts of solidarity which should not be overseen (Silverstein, 2005, p. 377). In this endeavor, I also employ the notion of “whiteness” which has been coined as an analytical term in research on white identities in the US by exploring “the center of power and privilege from which racialization emanates but which operates more or less invisibly as it constructs itself as both the norm and ideal of what it means to be human” (Steyn & Conway, 2010, p. 284). Garner (2006) distinguishes five key dimensions of “whiteness,” namely, invisibility, internal boundaries, a set of norms, resources, and hierarchies. In this article, I focus on the formation of the category “white” by paying particular attention to how its internal boundaries stretch beyond state borders.

Some remarks on my fieldwork in Kaliningrad

The data presented in this article derive from ethnographic fieldwork from a project on borders, boundaries, and homes in the Kaliningrad region which I conducted in 2015 and 2016. My extended stay in the city allowed me to listen to many encounters and conversations which unfolded among friends, acquaintances, and people I had not been in contact with before. Moreover, by living together with families, I observed daily how people draw boundaries very differently depending on the context and their interlocutor(s). My field notes of such conversations helped me to document and reflect on my growing “cultural intimacy” (Herzfeld, 2005). Surely, the fact that almost everybody knew that I am a researcher on migration from a German university stimulated many conversations on the topic, and might also have impacted on people’s arguments and attitudes. Still, in many conversations, people seemed simply to forget about my project while interacting with one another. I also interacted with people every day – in shops or at bus stations – who did not know that I am from Germany. This allowed me to discern various patterns of argumentation about racism, some of which were influenced by their knowledge of my background, and others that were not.

Along with participant observation and informal interviewing, my arguments are based on 46 life-story interviews of different types of migrants² and of those who were born in Kaliningrad (for more about life-story interviewing, see Linde, 1993; Miller, 2000; Plummer, 2001).³ Furthermore, I collected 12 pile sorts⁴ which helped me to see along which criteria the interviewees order Kaliningrad’s inhabitants (for the application of this method, see Bernard, 1995, pp. 237–55; Weller & Romney, 1998, pp. 9–31; see also Brubaker, 2004).⁵

Kaliningrad as the city of migrants

After the Second World War, the Prussian city of Königsberg became Kaliningrad, which experienced an almost complete population exchange as present-day residents and their ancestors came to the city and the surrounding area in several waves. This commenced with particularly destitute people from the devastated regions directly after the war, followed by military personnel some years later and labor migrants as well as Russians from the newly established independent states in Central Asia and elsewhere after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Newcomers tend to stress that they have chosen Kaliningrad especially because there were no real locals (*mestnie*) in the area that should have facilitated finding one's place in the city and being accepted as a migrant. However, the migrants' view of the city as "their city," namely the city of migrants, is not particularly widespread among those whose parents or grandparents moved to it. The second- and third-generation residents mostly stress that they are true locals because they were born here. The division between locals and newcomers is however not ethnically framed but rather crosscuts ethnic boundaries (see also Elias & Scotson, 1993 on nonethnic boundary drawings between the established and the outsiders).

On the basis of interview data and fieldnotes of every-day conversations, it shall now be exemplified how people in Kaliningrad order their world.

"While sitting around a kitchen table, a discussion about Kaliningrad's inhabitants unfolded among some of my friends and acquaintances, who were mostly middle-aged, migrants and non-migrants. Katya, being herself born in Kaliningrad and who works as a nurse, started the discussion by elaborating on Soviet policies of populating the region after the Second World War. She explained to the others, who were all migrants, that those policies aimed for the peaceful coexistence of many different nationalities. Consequently, Armenians, Tatars and people from Dagestan were also invited to come, and so they had to live with them as they do today. But then she waved aside the point by saying that, regardless, for her they would all be Russian [russskie]. Vera, who immigrated some fifteen years ago from Kirgizstan to Kaliningrad, threw in that Katya would obviously confuse the notions of *russskiy* and *rossiyskiy* by explaining that the former comprised ethnic Russians and only the latter referred to those with Russian passports though they ethnically might be, for instance, Armenian. However, Katya emphatically replied that she of course knew the terminological difference but that she would still just call all of them Russians." (Field notes 26 March 2016)

The minor incident exemplifies that the boundaries of one's own category are actually rather vague. This is certainly also due to the fact that most of the people I met have Russian ancestors in addition to Armenian, Georgian, German, Ukrainian, or others. The debatable boundaries, however, do not necessarily imply that the category can, in another context, not be used as a template for "whiteness" by even excluding those who were part of the Russian-Kaliningrad category in a different setting. In order to grasp more systematically how people order the city's inhabitants, I conducted pile sorts, i.e. I asked the interviewees how they would group the various people living in Kaliningrad.⁶ Katya, who, during our informal conversation depicted above, applied an inclusive notion of a Russian category, differentiated here very clearly between "Russian" migrants and the various Central Asian migrants:

"Well, I think if you come here you are obliged to acknowledge local traditions and conventions and you must know the language. If migrants do this I respect and accept them, if they don't do this, I will be against those migrants. We currently have a lot of those who are not previous Russians, for instance from Kirgizstan or wherever [...]. Those people who don't know the language and who don't intend to learn it. But well, what to tell: You, in Germany, so I think, have currently much more problems like this."

On the other hand, Vera grouped herself, namely Russians from Kirgizstan, together with ethnic Kirgiz, and not together with Russians from Kaliningrad. For me it seemed that she herself was a bit astonished by the groups she had built, which were lying on the table in front of her when she gave the following explanation:

"I am Russian, but I am a non-Russian Russian [nerusskaya russkaya]. [...] We [people from Kirgizstan] received the best traits of Kirgiz culture: respect towards elderly people, benevolence, and the wish to invite guests – even if we have to spend our last pennies. But Russians are not like this."

Vera is by far no exception in describing her Central Asian hometown as a cosmos of international harmony. The experienced interethnic peace was, however, usually felt as destroyed by a growing Central Asian nationalism after the break-up of the Soviet Union. Moreover, as indicated by many migrants, the peaceful living together of the various nationalities could also not be preserved in or brought to Kaliningrad, which has equally been and even from its very existence on, as said by the local Katya, a multiethnic city. However, this view is not shared by most migrants, who find the city's inhabitants to be rather reserved and egoistic. Thus, the shared experience of migration seems to a certain extent outdo ethnic differences and, accordingly, language and citizenship seem to be most important in determining someone's national belonging. However, this is only in principle as nonracial and flexible constructions do not apply for all people as exemplified by the report of another conversation which unfolded between Vladimir's son Sergey and her.

"Sergey first asked me what social anthropology was actually all about. After my answer, which included circuitous explanations of the situated and constructed character of all identities, Sergey emphatically replied that this might be true in general but nonetheless there were mentalities which never changed and which provoked 'real conflicts'; one of those being the conflict between Russians and 'people from Dagestan' who usually ganged together and as soon as they were given any kind of power, they mercilessly pursued their own goals. Moreover, they would all have a knife in their pocket and not shy away from using it. On my question of whether he had himself experienced that, maybe at school, he answered that he personally had never made any bad experiences not with anyone, but that those things were just a matter of fact known to everyone. Vera at first tried to break down Sergey's broad category of 'people from Dagestan' by explaining that there were many different nationalities living there, however, as our conversation proceeded, she recalled her holidays in Georgia at the age of sixteen during which she was almost forcibly married. Her story and maybe also Sergey's words made her finally agree with his view that all people from Dagestan indeed have a different and malicious mentality." (Field notes 10 April 2016)

Since I know Vera from many other conversations, it seems likely that she also could have followed up on the very diversity of people from Dagestan in another setting and with different interlocutors. However, her view on "mentality" expressed here seems to be so important to her that she tried to convince me although she knew that I hold a very different view on the topic. Moreover, I would like to point to Sergey who criticized his father for his racist attitude, as indicated above, but who himself in the context of "people from Dagestan" argues likewise. It is certainly not my intention to simply point out that people act inconsistently, since we all do, but rather those contradictions develop along the following lines: People tend to criticize others for being racist; however, they often act in the same manner towards a different group of people or in a different context. Furthermore, the Soviet values of internationalism and "friendship of the peoples" which are in themselves contradictory, still today seem to guide people's reasoning on nationality, identity, and "mentality."

As for the people with whom I talked in Kaliningrad, it seems that many struggle with ordering the world after large-scale political, economic, and social changes. Thus, most

people strive for a tolerant world and those who utter racist conceptions often even outdo one another in regard to the multicultural heritage they embody which they fear to be threatened by the nonmulticultural other, be it the nationalist Kirgiz, the egoistic local from Kaliningrad, or the non-Russian speaking migrant. The contradictory Soviet concept of the friendship of the people still informs people's thinking by celebrating diversity and equally cementing the other's mentality which presents a fertile ground for binary constructions by, at the same time, disguising them (cf. Herzfeld, 2005). One of the criteria that are taken for building a dichotomy is religion. In the following section, I turn from colonial and Soviet conceptions as a model for racist thinking to "Islamophobia."

Searching for a Muslim place

Since the 1990s, Kaliningrad has received many new religious buildings, among them numerous Orthodox churches, as well as various Protestant and Catholic churches. However, the Muslim community still meets in an old shack on the edge of the city next to a decaying carcass, which was once meant to become their new religious home.⁷ According to official statistics from 2002, more than 100 different nationalities live in the Kaliningrad Region, whereby about 80 percent of the population is Russian. Those nationalities, which are usually regarded as Muslim, mostly comprise Tatars, Azeri, Uzbeks, Tadzhiks, Bashkirs, and Chechens. They are an estimated 1.5 percent of the population. However, many migrant workers live illegally in Kaliningrad, and estimates in regard to the Muslim population vary from 12 000 to 100 000, whereby the former figure was given by Igor Gurov, the chief expert on ethnic and religious matters for the local Government, and the latter by a representative of the Muslim community (cf. Karpenko, 2014, p. 135f).

The conflict between the Muslim communities, the Orthodox Church, various political leaders, and the public dates back to 1994 when the Religious Organization of Muslims of the Kaliningrad Oblast (ROM) started to negotiate with the city administration about possible locations for a future mosque (Karpenko, 2014, p. 139). Finally, in 2008, the building of a mosque could begin; however, it was interdicted again shortly after, which is why the half-built mosque now is slowly deteriorating. For Karpenko (2014), the conflict around the mosque building can best be understood as a "creeping crisis," in which the local administration assigned a site for the future mosque several times, whereupon public protest – organized by a right-wing movement⁸ and the Orthodox Church – arose, resulting in the local administration backtracking from their previous assignment by even partly supporting the protests (p. 145). This led to a situation of permanent legal uncertainty.

The majority of public opinion, even those who openly protested against the mosque, generally did not mind Muslims erecting a mosque. Instead, the argument was that the future mosque should be modest in size (equivalent to their numerically minor position in society) and, even more importantly, that the mosque should be located on the outskirts and not close to any place of cultural significance. The latter point, in particular, was highly controversial since the initially assigned location was close to a cemetery for veterans of the Second World War and the second, where the half-built mosque stands right now, lies on the territory of the Prussian "Friedländer Tor," where a museum of the Prussian past is located (cf. Karpenko, 2014, p. 146f). As a matter of course, representatives of the Orthodox Church and public voices identify both, the cemetery and the Prussian building, as Russian and Orthodox, whereas only representatives of the Muslim organizations have publicly uttered

that both sites are neither Orthodox nor Muslim, since Soviet soldiers (which comprise also Muslim ones) are buried at the cemetery, and the Prussian gate belongs to the previous Königsberg, which was neither Orthodox nor Muslim.

"A small sign at the gate indicates that there is a mosque on the premises, where the Friedländer-Tor-museum, the half-built mosque and the shack used as a prayer house, are located⁹. When I visited it, a couple of men were standing in front of the door, one of whom was Tadjik who for the past six years had come to work in Kaliningrad on a construction site annually for a couple of months. He told me that there were about 200 to 300 men meeting regularly in the prayer room each Friday and that there was no prayer room for women. Moreover, he stressed that his religion is a peaceful one.

Afterwards, I spoke to an employee of the museum who expressed her discontent about the Muslim prayer room on their premises. She explained that Islam was not at all an element of Königsberg's history and was actually not one of Kaliningrad's history either. Once, she visited the prayer room, but she did not like that she had to take off her shoes, and she was actually afraid of looking closely in the prayer room. However, she repeatedly expressed that she simply did not know what was actually going on in the building. On the other hand, she emphasized that she had nothing against Muslims and Islam in general, and she would also favor the building of a mosque, but just on the outskirts of Kaliningrad and not here. Furthermore, she presented herself as a tolerant person who had Jewish, Orthodox and atheistic relatives, and if the Muslims moved out of the building one day she would be eager to open a small museum which would be committed to interreligious dialog, where Muslims should also present their culture. Finally, she asked me about the incidents of New Year's Eve in Cologne 2015 and thereby expressed that she was afraid of Muslim terrorist attacks." (Field notes 6 May 2016)

The museum for interreligious dialog envisioned by the employee resembles state-sponsored institutions devoted to people's friendship, in which also Muslims – better to say Tatars, Uzbeks, etc. – are invited to present their traditions. Thus, Muslims are, in principle, part of the Soviet cosmos, and according to the words of the employee, the "Muslim threat" is not so much seen as integral part of this Soviet cosmos but rather comes from the outside of "international Muslim terrorism."

Karpenko (2014) and several other authors (e.g. Sezneva, 2010) try to analyze identities in Kaliningrad by applying a dichotomy of liberal, Western-style identities, on the one side, and Russian-nationalistic identities on the other, whereby only the latter are, implicitly or explicitly, associated with racist thinking. On the basis of my findings, such a dichotomy is misleading precisely because the identification with liberal-Western attitudes yields to islamophobic sentiments. Carr (2016, p. 45) states that "in the contemporary, global, neoliberal era Muslimness is presented as the problematic identity par excellence," and it seems that being afraid of Muslims is *the* vehicle to finding common ground with the "West" in contemporary Kaliningrad.

Shifting boundaries and racial frontiers

"East" and "West" seem to merge at a place where the previous Königsberg marked the outmost "West," while Kaliningrad designates the outmost "East." The historian Larry Wolff states in "Inventing Eastern Europe" that since the era of Enlightenment, the "East," like the "Orient," has been constructed as an antiworld to the "West." But in contrast to the "Orient," the "East" is not a complete other, but rather "the dark side within," or "a paradox of simultaneous inclusion and exclusion," and ultimately "Europe but not Europe" (cited in Salein, 2005, p. 143). Remarkably, most research frameworks keep the categories "East" and "West" apart.

Studies situated in the “East” are usually framed as research on transition and transformation while research dealing primarily with the “West” (and the “Global South”) typically uses concepts like transnationalism, globalization, postcolonialism, and translocality.¹⁰ Since the break-up of the Soviet Union, the “East” is even more associated with a state of underdevelopment, and concepts for the “East” like transition and transformation are thus essentially to be understood as catching up on the modernization track. Furthermore, many criteria for success on this track like civilization, individual and society date back to the era of Enlightenment (cf. Salein, 2005, pp. 185–195).

Michael Herzfeld (2013) uses the case of Greece to show that those regions located between Western metropolis and Eastern colonies are vulnerable areas of unclear belonging. Moreover, in Kaliningrad (and elsewhere in Russia), migrants and nonmigrants are often connected to places far beyond the previous Soviet cosmos, which often provoke ambivalent feelings of belonging to Europe and of being different from it at the same time. In regard to those people I met in Kaliningrad, I could observe slightly changing attitudes towards the “West,” and in particular towards Germany during the last two years. In early 2015, the military conflict in Ukraine dominated people’s opinions on their transnational relations and on their situation in Russia’s EU exclave. The following statement of Natalya reflects what many people have told me, in particular those who, like Natalya, grew up in Kaliningrad:

“The enlargement of the NATO yields stress and it yields stress that this also concerns Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. I remember those times when we went to Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. I was just born here. We were familiar with it and it was close to us [...]. We were no enemies. And now they very easily could leave the Union, no one stopped them. [...] And when these anti-Russian sentiments came up ... I cannot understand them, they, in several ways, even hurt and offend me because ... And I don’t know, maybe, I’m not right, but I think that this is the effect of those political games. It is not people’s sentiment. Honestly said, I talk to Poles and they come to us, and among them there are only a very few people who utter anti-Russian sentiments. Well, these political games and our [Russia’s] answers, of course, this is frightening. The more we all very well know that, in case someone starts imprudently any kind of military action, then our region [oblast] will suffer enormously and they also won’t evacuate the people from here.”

Natalya and many other people I met in Kaliningrad express feelings of frustration, anger, and disorder because they cannot understand why the “West” applies different standards. In their view, Russia accepted the enlargement of the NATO, although that implied Kaliningrad becoming an exclave. On the other hand, the wishes of the Crimean population to become part of Russia was met with the country’s defamation and the imposition of sanctions. While sitting in Natalya’s car, she went on to explain that until very recently, most of her friends and acquaintances were rather critical towards President Putin and his politics by looking at the flourishing cities situated further West. Now, many of them had become patriots partially because they felt badly treated by Western politicians. But by far, most of the people with whom I spoke restricted their criticism of Western politicians, so they avoided accusing all Germans of being arrogant, egoistic, and anti-Russian.

When I came back to Kaliningrad at the end of 2015 and, in particular, during 2016, the narratives concerning the East–West conflict around the war in Ukraine were largely replaced by another prevailing topic, namely the so-called refugee crisis in Germany. A statement from a salesperson exemplifies what many people uttered in similar ways:

“After I decided which flowers to buy, the salesperson, a middle-aged woman, started a conversation. She explained that she bought most of her decorations in Poland, and she stressed that she was well aware of the fact that we, in Germany, really knew how to decorate our homes

beautifully. But then, she shook her head and asked me whether I could really vote again for Merkel (I did not indicate that I ever did so). Since I just shrugged my shoulders, she went on to say that she could not at all understand why Merkel wanted so many Muslim migrants to come. Those migrants would, finally, not work. In Kaliningrad, they also had migrants, for instance, Uzbeks, but those people came to Kaliningrad for work, and not to receive social benefits, as was the case in Germany. Moreover, she said that she has friends living in Hannover, who were afraid of all the foreign people, who might even be terrorists and they were joking that if this flood of migrants would not abate, they might come back to Kaliningrad one day. And the salesperson concluded that I could always migrate to Kaliningrad in order to be safe, more so because I was working in the city of Cologne which is clearly dangerous. Another customer, who had listened to our conversation, added that he felt a lot of pity for the Germans, and actually, also for themselves because it was not only that German culture would now cease to exist but they would also lose their most important cultural ideal." (Field notes 11 May 2016)

Against the background of recent immigration to Germany, people generally highlighted that they would prefer to live in Kaliningrad instead of dangerous, dirty, and untidy cities like Cologne or Berlin. Moreover, she offered me, as well as other Germans, the opportunity to live safely in Kaliningrad, which reflects the Russian sentiment of saving Europe, which is implied by Arnold and Romanova (2013). Furthermore, in the faces of the "really foreign and Muslim people" whom Germany was now accommodating, their own Muslim migrants appeared much closer and more native, and were usually positively evaluated in their capacity to work, as indicated by the salesperson. Grosfoguel (2004, p. 329) makes the point that "the absence of a colonial history within a particular empire makes an important difference in terms of how the identities of migrants are constructed and, thus, perceived." In order to illustrate his point, he gives the example of African Americans who move to Paris in order to escape the racism of the United States. Those hierarchies among colonial and noncolonial migrants are in the case of Kaliningrad partly reversed. It seems that the Soviet cosmos in fact differed from other colonial settings and that the idea of the friendship among the former colonizers and the colonized was in part accepted by the people (cf. Sahadeo, 2007).

On this note, in the encounters and narratives presented above, two boundaries are getting more pervious: The first concerns that between (Muslim) migrants and nonmigrants in Kaliningrad, the second boundary concerns that between ("white") Russians in Kaliningrad and ("white") Germans in Germany, which was temporarily strengthened through the war in Ukraine, and, of course, might gain in importance again. Consequently, on one hand, though the bond between "white" Europeans which was established against the background of "Muslim invasion" is clearly expressed by some people, the same people might equally emphatically speak for their "own good Muslim workers." On the other hand, there are voices who do not support the "white European bond" and who would equally see no common grounds with the local migrants. All in all, however, recent immigration flows in Germany, and Europe in general, seem to help holding together the old Soviet cosmos and its implicit orientation along "Western civilization," which is often deemed to be threatened by foreign, namely non-Soviet Muslim migrants.

Threats and belongings

At least since the Era of Enlightenment, "Eastern" dichotomies of "black" and "white" have been developed in relation to those in the "West." Present-day writings on racism often touch upon the issues of its global interconnectedness. For instance, Silverstein (2005, p. 367)

explores the “transnationalization of race” and the subsequent “growing reduction and hardening of fluid racial categories along a singular black–white spectrum [...] on a global scale.” In present-day Kaliningrad, however, those concepts are not as fixed and hardened as they seem at first glance because the same people might construct in- and outgroups differently depending on the context, which also implies its transnational embeddedness.

Zakharov (2015, p. 184) distinguishes the Russian case as “an internal civilizing mission intended to secure Russian otherness on the global stage.” However, the case presented here has in fact revealed people’s ambivalences towards the “West.” Surely, in a city like Kaliningrad, which is surrounded by the EU, the wish to be accepted as equal European partner seems to be more widespread than elsewhere in Russia. But people’s self-perception as “white” Europeans while talking about the fear of Muslim terrorism appears unlikely to be restricted to Kaliningrad. Consequently, “Western”-style attitudes and European identities should not be confused too hastily with a liberal and democratic stance because they might be motivated first and foremost by the racialized exclusion of Muslim people.

On the other hand, ongoing conflicts between the “West” and Russia might strengthen Russian nationalism. They also, as I have shown here, reinforce the old empire’s borders and bring all those who share a Soviet memory closer to one another by viewing the common threat only outside of this familiar world. As for the case of Kaliningrad, people draw boundaries along three layers: firstly, all people of post-Soviet states are included; secondly, the city of Kaliningrad is distinguished; and thirdly, oneself is different. Interestingly, one integral part of one’s own “world” is that racism is absent and exists only outside of it. Thus, people generally strive to be tolerant, and furthermore, they conceptualize their city as a place where different people peacefully live together; this is also how the Soviet cosmos generally conceives of itself in comparison with the West.

Such a stance of seeing racism only in a foreign part of the world is certainly also a late effect of the Soviet concern for “people’s friendship,” which was enacted by cementing traditions and “mentalities” and by disguising unfriendly, namely racist, incidents. Still, in present-day Kaliningrad, people argue on the grounds of peoples’ friendship by evoking the old empire. Consequently, Central Asian migrants are seen both as (potentially) an equal part of this “world” and also as inferior people who are the descendants of those who were previously labeled as “*inorodtsy*” – nomadic people who cannot be controlled and ordered easily. Thus, Soviet binarism also bears the potential of also explicitly excluding one’s own migrants, especially if they are Muslim, mobile, and non-Russian-speaking. Related to this last point, the loss of the Russian language is interpreted as deliberately leaving the old Soviet world; this degrades its protective shield and brings those migrants closer to the almost globally perceived threat of young Muslim men (cf. Silverstein, 2005, p. 366f; cf. Werbner, 2005; cf. Zanca, 2013, p. 290 on the role of the Russian language).

However, as has been said before, a racial concept of “whiteness” is often more used to exclude Muslim immigrants in non-Russian Europe than towards one’s own (Muslim) immigrants. This distinguishes the Russian case from most other colonial histories and presents (cf. Grosfoguel, 2004). Moreover, recent years in Kaliningrad have shown that racialized dichotomies might also shift not only as a result of changing migratory processes and migration regimes in one’s own or a foreign state, but also as a result of conflicts between the previous colonial powers, which imply changing perceptions of “whiteness.” Thus, for theorizing transnational racialization, more credence should be given to historic and recent entanglements with the “East.”

Finally, my arguments evolved from people's contradictory attitudes of who they are and who are the others, which could only be detected while spending an extended period of time with them. It seems that research on racism should probably pay even more attention to ambivalent categorizations and its specific contexts rather than to detecting assumingly neat dichotomies of "black" and "white" at the risk of concealing the complexities of people's striving for order and sense in the world around them.

Notes

1. The number of labor migrants from sub-Saharan countries is generally quite low in Russia and negligible in Kaliningrad (cf. Bondarenko, Googueva, Serov, & Shakhbazyan, 2009).
2. Among those interviewees are people from Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kirgizstan, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, and Ukraine as well as from different parts of Russia, in particular from Siberia and the Far East, who are sometimes also labeled as migrants or resettlers. Roughly, my sample reflects the migratory background of Kaliningrad's residents. However, it is not a random sample but compiled by means of the snowball principle.
3. All life-story interviews were conducted in Russian, taped, transcribed by an assistant, and translated by me (as to the passages cited here). I followed mainly the "realist approach" advocated by Miller (2000, pp. 92–95), and I only asked more focused questions after the interviewees had concluded their life stories.
4. I asked 12 interviewees to note down each "group" that lives in Kaliningrad on a separate sheet of paper (whereby I stressed that it is their decision what kind of groups they build). Secondly, I asked them to sort those groups and to explain the criteria they used to do so. It was up to them how many piles they built. I noted down the visual result and taped the interviews (see also Sanders, 2016, p. 97f).
5. Furthermore, I conducted more than 20 semistructured interviews, especially with experts. For the analysis of the narrative data, I used in particular grounded theory approaches (cf. Charmaz & Mitchell, 2001).
6. Most often, people used nationality categories (like Uzbek, Russian, etc.) to build groups and religion and/or territory in order to sort those groups and build piles (like people from Central Asia comprising Uzbeks, Tajiks etc.).
7. Moreover, there is a small mosque that was built in a suburb of Kaliningrad in 2006. The two Muslim communities belong together.
8. This is the "Movement against Illegal Migration" (DPNI) (Karpenko, 2014, p. 137).
9. There was actually a fourth building, which was newly constructed as storage for the museum.
10. However, several authors (amongst others Chari & Verdery, 2009; Randeria & Römhild, 2013; Salein, 2005) seek to bridge "Eastern" and "Western studies" and to disclose historic entanglements.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding

This work was supported by DFG [grant number SA 3074/1-1].

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